

Theorizing with Managers to Bridge the Theory-Praxis Gap: Foundations for a Research Tradition

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Abstract

Purpose –To refine an agenda concerning the theory-praxis gap in order to develop a foundation for a research tradition.

Approach – We synthesize and build on the suggestions the suggestions in commentary articles by Kohli (2017), Leeflang (2017) and Möller (2017). .

Findings – We develop a research agenda consisting of issues.

1. The need for a systemic view of business practice
2. The need for innovative and meaningful theoretical understanding
3. The need to identify conditions and approaches for collaborative theorizing
4. To further define and instruct the abductive approach
5. To explore pragmatic realism to ensure both practical outcomes and truthful theories

Originality/value – The five issues are a step towards developing a theory-praxis research tradition.

Keywords theory-practice gap, collaborative theorizing, abductive reasoning, pragmatic realism

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The commentary articles by Ajay Kohli, Peter Leeflang and Kristian Möller raise a number of important research issues that extend and refine the ideas in our paper (Nenonen et al. 2016). In our response we synthesize the suggestions in order to further refine the research agenda concerning the theory-praxis gap which serve as foundation to develop a research tradition. In doing so we recognize other recent initiatives that have focused on this issue. For example, in 2010 Nick Lee and Gordon Greenley as editors of the *European Journal of Marketing* published an editorial “The theory-practice divide: thoughts from the Editors and Senior Advisory Board of EJM”. Other more recent initiatives include the special issues in *Industrial Marketing Management* “Implementing strategies and theories of B2B marketing and sales management” and “Theoretical developments in industrial marketing management: Multidisciplinary perspectives”.

1. Need for a systemic view of business practice

While our paper focuses specifically on theorizing with managers, Möller (2016) raises the deserving question “Should we care **only** about managers?” In contemporary marketing understanding the societal, economic, cultural, political, and environmental consequences of the marketing behaviours and practices of business firms goes beyond managerial contribution. Hence future research needs to take a systemic view of practice, focusing on the relevance of research to a broader range of stakeholders. For example, as businesses have to get increasingly involved in working out the sustainability challenges (both social and environmental) a more systemic perspective to businesses is needed, potentially involving theorizing with multiple groups of stakeholders. However, we see that there is a difference between acknowledging the interests of multiple stakeholders in addition to commercial organizations and forgetting the interests of commercial organizations altogether. Unlike many other social sciences, marketing is in a unique position to bring the commercial viewpoints to the broad tables in which wicked problems such as sustainability challenges are discussed.

2. Need for innovative and meaningful theoretical understanding

Möller (2016) argues that there is a need to push theoretical boundaries and that includes publishing more speculative work and embracing scientific pluralism. We strongly agree with this and in our paper we elaborate on methodological pluralism that is embedded in abductive reasoning. We argue that this leads to research that provides innovative and meaningful theoretical understanding. In addition, we agree with Möller that the adoption of

pluralism challenges the rules of publishing because editors and reviewers for the elite journals are, perhaps, more comfortable with traditional approaches. However, we recognize there is change taking place with European journals having more eclectic editorial policies. Furthermore, these journals are starting to be ranked alongside the North America counterparts. This shift in rankings is being driven by downloads and citations rather than historical reputation, further augmented by sophisticated bibliometrics that are increasingly being used to provide measurements to indicate quality.

A related issue is the question about whether theorizing about management and marketing should be an activity driven – at least to some extent – by the self-reflexive manager? In his commentary, Leeflang (2016) suggests that practitioners favour simple, complete and robust solutions that are prescriptive in nature – perhaps because many marketing problems are repetitive in nature and practicing managers are working under considerable time constraints. While we fully acknowledge practitioners' time constraints and preference for prescriptive outcomes over descriptive, our experience in theorizing with managers doesn't support the conclusion that practitioners want simple solutions that fit their existing mental models. Quite the contrary, we repeatedly hear managers asking for more radical and bolder research initiatives. So, we see Möller's (2016) call for more research that is more speculative and boundary-pushing in nature, in fact, a solution for closing the widening theory-praxis gap. Perhaps the gap is increasing because we marketing scholars are publishing such incremental and/or tangential contributions that they run the risk of being seen to be boring, while practitioners – rightfully so – expect more from us?

3. Identifying conditions and approaches for collaborative theorizing

The Kohli (2016) and Leeflang (2016) commentaries highlight the importance of identifying conditions where collaborative theorizing is likely to be successful and more granular advice on which approach to use in various contexts. The Möller (2016) commentary adds to the discussion: we particularly see his recent paper that delivers a broader conceptualization and classification of managerial relevance (Möller & Parvinen 2015) a valuable one, providing also more nuanced and context-specific guidance in terms of which research approach to employ in various situations.

In a similar vein, the Leeflang commentary identifies conditions when collaborative theorizing in marketing science is likely to be successful, drawing on his 40 years of experience of

working with managers. Central to success is having two way socialization processes between managers and academics. This must also include the involvement of the practitioner in the initiation of the project so that they have a personal stake in the project, and developing an understanding of the theory and research outcomes with managers. Leeflang (2016) uses four cases where he was deeply engaged in projects that led to successful outcomes in academe and practice to elaborate on these issues.

We see the issues raised by Leeflang (2016), Kohli (2016) and Möller (2016) as very important. Articles that incorporate reflexive accounts of what resulted from successful (and unsuccessful) projects could lead to research that is also more normative in nature. The challenge will be, however, to have journals recognizing the value of this work. One option would be broad-based journals, such as *European Journal of Marketing*, to encourage this type of research by having a separate theory-praxis section. This would go beyond drawing normative implications from academic research. To guide this we suggest developing a normative conceptual framework for theorizing with managers, starting from determining the purpose of collaborative theorizing, and linking the various methodological choices to this purpose. In such a framework, of particular importance is the issue of how to socialize relevant knowledge and to overcome the inevitable tensions under various conditions.

4. Further defining and instructing the abductive approach

All of the commentaries recognize the need for an abductive approach based on pragmatism. Kohli (2016) recognizes that abduction may mean different things depending on what one is trying to accomplish. He goes on to say that our paper fails to provide a preferred definition and an outline of the way abduction should be used in the research process. We also see this as an important issue. Our work summarizes the current views on abduction and concludes that due to the variance in using the term, researchers should explicate in detail how and when abduction has been used in their theorizing process. It is our sincere hope that there, in the near future, would be a sufficient body of research using abduction when theorizing with managers to start building a typology and a set of prescriptions related to abduction: the various forms of abduction, informative labels for each form, and suggestions in terms of when to utilize a particular form of abduction.

5. Pragmatic realism to ensure both practical outcomes and truthful theories

As Möller (2016) in his commentary states, heterogeneity among researchers and research methodologies should improve our collective possibilities on improving the rigor and relevance of marketing research. As we discuss in our paper, many researchers that theorize with managers or propose collaborative theorizing as a way of bridging the theory-praxis gap implicitly embrace the principles of pragmatism. However, as with abduction, there is variance in the use of the term and debate about the ontological assumptions that pragmatism is based on. While we suggest an ontological position based on a realist view of pragmatic realism (Sosa, 1993) we recognize that other managerial research has taken alternative ontological position based on relativist pragmatism position (Simpson, forthcoming).

We favour pragmatic realism because it leads to a philosophical position that challenges consensus-based pragmatic approaches that often support the status quo, or that favour particular practical outcomes. As Mingers (2014) notes in his assessment of purely consensus-based pragmatism, if the purpose of science is seen as essentially a practical activity aimed at producing useful knowledge rather than understanding the true nature of the world, then the meaning of a concept will be specified purely in terms of the actual practical effects that it has. Theory would be that which comes to be believed by a community of scientists in the long term, rather than as correspondence to reality.

In agreement with Kohli (2016), in relation to building theory with managers we suggest that it is important to start with phenomena managers are sensitive to and that matter to them. This is in line with Leeflang's (2016) assertion that managerial commitment will be enhanced if they have a "personal stake" in the research problem. Thus, it is by building theory with managers that we are more likely to increase its explanatory power, because managers will often see more about what is "real" in their situation than we as outsiders are able to. While consensus-building is an important means of understanding the world, in the absence of a human ability to know what is real in any unmediated way (Hunt, 2003; Mingers, 2014) we cannot rely on consensus alone. Building theory with managers is therefore more likely to result in true theories – theories having a strong correspondence to reality, that is – rather than mere summaries of managerial consensus if researchers are rigorous in their use of abduction. The dispassionate dialogue between empirical observations and constantly evolving theoretical frameworks should help academics to weed out potential managerial self-interests and erroneous consensuses – while producing interesting theoretical contributions with practical value.

In conclusion, we see the five issues we have discussed as a step towards developing a theory-praxis research tradition that leads to a stream of published research in academic journals. We suggest that a broad-based journals, such as *European Journal of Marketing*, to encourage this type of research by having a separate applications theory-praxis section. It is important to emphasize that this would go beyond drawing normative implications from academic research.

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